

How Mrs. Preston Gibson Played Hide and Seek With the Detectives

But When the Sympathetic Officers Who Were Told That She Had Been Ill in a Hospital Saw the Pictures of Her at the Venetian Ball--Well! That Was Just the Last Straw That Broke the Camel's Back!

FOR more than a year private detectives, process servers, attorneys, and even the sheriff of New York County, had been trying to serve a summons upon Mrs. Preston Gibson. Mrs. Gibson is now the wife of the well-known playwright and social leader. Before that she was the wife of Captain Alexander Dallas Bache Pratt, whom she divorced. She is a granddaughter of Henry H. Rogers, the Standard Oil capitalist, and a cousin of Mrs. Caruso. Mrs. Pratt is very beautiful and, of course, has the entrée into the highest circles everywhere.

Not at all the kind of lady, you would say, to be the objective of scores of detectives and process servers, and even the sheriff of New York County. And not at all the kind of light that could hide under a bushel and play hide and seek with them for over a year.

Yet, so it was. Just before Mrs. Pratt became Mrs. Gibson she had bought some jewels and had given a promissory note for \$2,539 for them. She had failed to take up the note, suit had been brought and the summons had been issued ordering Mrs. Gibson to come to court and defend herself.

And for over a year all this array of officers had failed to find her and hand her that little paper.

Now, at last, in mid-November, they had closed in upon her. Serving of the summons seemed inevitable. Just then, on the morning of November 23, Assistant Deputy Sheriff William Lee received the nicest little letter from Mr. Preston Gibson, the husband. It had been written and post-marked the day previous, and read:

"Dear Mr. Lee:
"Your letter to Mrs. Gibson rec'd.
"I am sorry, but she has been quite ill in the hospital and went to the country Sat. for a rest.
"I expect she will be in town Friday. Will let you know.
"Thank you for your courtesy in the matter. Very truly yours,
"PRESTON GIBSON."

Immediately the attorneys for the prosecution were communicated with. They were sympathetic. So were all the process servers and detectives. Wouldn't it be a shame to harass any further beautiful Mrs. Gibson when she had just left the hospital and must be at the best weak and depressed?

Indeed it would, they agreed. And so they called the matter off until Friday, November 26.

On Tuesday night, November 23, the Venetian Ball, a gay rout of masks in which all fashionable society turned themselves loose, was given. And the next morning all the New York newspapers carried news of it and pictures of notable participants.

Attorneys for the prosecution, detectives, process servers and the sheriff's office each turned to their favorite paper—turned, stiffened and looked at each other, dazed. "Impossible!" exclaimed all of them.

"It can't be!" they exclaimed again. And again they read carefully the caption under a most striking photograph of a most strikingly healthy and cheerful lady in a most striking costume.

"Well, this is the limit!" they groaned together. For the photograph upon which they gazed was that of Mrs. Gibson, the supposedly poor, suffering lady who had just come out of the hospital! And the text under the picture very plainly stated that this was Mrs. Gibson as she had appeared at the Venetian Ball the night before, and the articles all indicated that among those present she had been one of the very merriest!

But before going more fully into the details of that harrowing disillusion and what followed close upon it, everyone will want to know, of course, how Mrs. Preston Gibson, social leader, going everywhere, flitting from Newport to New York, to Palm Beach, out West, and anywhere the fancy beckoned, shopping, dining, entertaining and being entertained everywhere, could have played hide and seek successfully for a year from all those officers of the law who were hunting her.

It was on July 18 of 1919, shortly after her divorce from "Alec" Pratt, that the present Mrs. Gibson dropped in on an exclusive Fifth Avenue jeweller and selected some \$2,500 worth of gew-gaws. She did not have the cash with her, but she was Mrs. Alexander Dallas Bache Pratt, you know—and just send the bill. The firm was dubious, very; people who headed the lists of fashion were often much harder to get to pay their bills than those who were still unknown even to the bottom of the list.

And then, frankly, Mrs. Pratt wasn't rated as an A1 credit customer in the confidential books of the guild of merchants. The money her grandfather had left her was largely tied up in a trust fund, and although it was reported that she had \$300,000 a year to spend—well, the best that could be said was that she was not an A1 credit customer. Still, the firm

didn't want to offend her. Maybe Madame would give a promissory note, due in two months, for the jewels; then she could take away her purchases and not be bothered with bills. Would Madame?

Madame would, and did. Cheerfully the jewellers put the note away. If when the note came due Mrs. Pratt didn't pay, it would be easy to summon her to court and make her. So easy, they thought, with Mrs. Pratt going everywhere and being entertained everywhere and figuring all the time in the social news of the papers, which told practically day by day just what she had been doing and was going to do. Yes; they'd have no trouble in getting hold of Mrs. Alexander D. B. Pratt!

The note became due and was returned by the bank, protested, with the report that no funds could be found to pay it. A few days later Mr. Meyer Boskey, attorney for Jacques, Gems and Precious Stones, the jewellers, began legal action against Mrs. Pratt to recover the debt. A summons was issued, ordering her to appear and defend the complaint. Until Mrs. Pratt was handed this writ, personally, or her own attorneys accepted service for her, the suit, of course, could not go on.

But that was all right, oh, yes! An experienced process server, who had served legal papers for Mr. Boskey for many years, would go right up to the Plaza, or wherever it was Mrs. Pratt was living, and hand her the summons. He hopped out, promising that he would be back long before lunch.

But he wasn't. It was a weary and puzzled process server who reported late that day that he had been everywhere and just couldn't find Mrs. Pratt anywhere. They wouldn't give him any satisfaction at the hotel, wouldn't let him wait around and, besides, he wouldn't know Mrs. Pratt if he saw her. He had been to the mansion of her father, Mr. William E. Benjamin, but the butler had said she wasn't there. He had looked in at half a dozen charity affairs, hoping to have her pointed out to him. But there had been nothing doing. Well, better luck next day, maybe.

And the next day and the next were the same. By that time, though, the process servers—two of them were now on the job—had tried to familiarize themselves with Mrs. Pratt's appearance by studying a mass of her pictures. They began to get a little giddy. It is a curious fact that although it is said that the camera cannot lie, no two snapshots of anybody ever look quite the same, and it takes a genius like Sherlock Holmes to pick out, as a rule, the same and it takes a dozen charity affairs, hoping to have her pointed out to him. But there had been nothing doing. Well, better luck next day, maybe.

So the process servers weren't helped so much by the pictures. In fact, they were hindered. After accosting various indignant ladies who denied being Mrs. Pratt and threatened to make trouble for somebody, and as for such impudence, they never did hear of such a thing, the writ servers developed a strain of super-caution. Several times they were sure that it was Mrs. Pratt who stepped into a high-power car that she drove herself, but the car was too quick for them to follow.

Yet Mrs. Pratt was certainly all around town. Down in Attorney Boskey's office a new department had been formed, whose sole duty it was to go over every newspaper, magazine and society journal to try to find clues to her.

And just about this time Mrs. Pratt ran away to Greenwich with Preston Gibson and was married by a justice of the peace there. The papers were full of it and the subsequent rupture of relations between herself and her parents, who couldn't see twice-divorced Mr. Gibson at all as a son-in-law, and made no bones about coming right out in the papers and saying so. Now and then a reporter got to Mrs. Gibson, the former Mrs. Pratt, but the process servers—never. She certainly seemed to have an uncanny way of keeping out of their way.



And This Is Mrs. Gibson in One of the Swift Automobiles That the Process Servers Couldn't Follow.

the litigation which she had started against her father was settled. Mr. Boskey needn't have any fear about Mrs. Gibson going away though. She had taken a five-year lease on a house at No. 159 East Sixty-third street, New York. Mr. Freeman was very discouraging about service. Mrs. Gibson didn't want to be annoyed by service, he said; there wasn't any use trying, for she wouldn't permit herself to be served or allow anybody to enter her apartments, or stick around the hotel; in fact, she had given strict instructions to this effect to the management.

Mr. Boskey thought all this over. If Mrs. Gibson had money enough to take an expensive house up in the Sixty-thirds she certainly had enough to pay that jeweller's bill! But, also, Mr. Freeman had gone quite fully into the details of the litigation between Mrs. Gibson and her father. Mr. Boskey did a little detective work of his own. He had the various complaints and affidavits on file looked up and their dates recorded. And what Mr. Boskey said and thought when he saw that day after day when his poor process had been travelling from Newport to New York and back again and to California and Palm Beach, Mrs. Gibson had been right in New York signing those papers!

This was too much! He sought the aid of the Sheriff of New York, Assistant Sheriff Lee started out to serve the summons. He met suave Mr. Gibson. Mr. Gibson promised to let him meet Mrs. Gibson. Time after time he promised.

After a while the sheriff's goat, figuratively speaking, began bleating loudly, joining the lousy chorus of those others who had tried before him. He sent a peremptory demand for a show down, and it was in answer to it that he received that sweetly told letter from Mr. Gibson quoted at the beginning. It was a good letter and it touched everybody. All the officers from the Sheriff down had a clear mental image of a poor, pallid woman being carried out of a hospital into an automobile and going to some quiet, restful shelter to try to recover strength enough to come to town on Friday and accept at last that summons. They wouldn't disturb her, no.

They came down to their offices next morning with a strong sense of virtue and approving consciences. They had withheld the club of the law from the head of the weak, they had tempered justice with mercy and had succored the suffering.

Reading over the society columns had by this time become a habit, however, and quite naturally they turned to accounts of the Venetian ball, a dazzling, gorgeous, colorful and musical rout which had begun early the night before and ended late that morning. All the beauty and chivalry of New York fashionable society had been there and the newspapers had given quite a lot of space to it. They skimmed over the details and then suddenly their attention was riveted, one by one. They had come across a name!

Mrs. Preston Gibson!

Yes—Mrs. Preston Gibson had been at the Venetian ball!

Mrs. Gibson, whose husband had written that "she has been quite ill in the hospital and went to the country Sat. for a rest" had not only been there, but if reports were true had been one of the jolliest, gayest, happiest of them all.

And to clinch the reports there were actually pictures of her as she had looked at the ball. They scanned the photographs minutely. Mrs. Gibson appeared plump and well fed, almost buxom. No trace of illness in her figure. And no trace of it or need of rest in the dazzling smile the camera had caught! Very well and fit, indeed, did Mrs. Gibson look in her costume; while the costume itself bore evidence of costing well nigh as much as was called for by the suit the weary and worn subpoena was to institute.

Down with mercy! Let justice be done and the chips fall where they might!

Attorney Boskey sent to the Supreme Court of New York an affidavit in which he set forth the various moves in Mrs. Gibson's game of hide and seek with the subpoena, and ended it with the exhibits of Mr. Gibson's letter to the Sheriff, the newspaper clippings of the Venetian ball and Mrs. Gibson's published photographs in connection with it. He asked that the Supreme Court put an end to this "deliberate evasion" of service by allowing service of the summons simply by leaving it at Mrs. Gibson's home.

And Justice Geiger promptly issued an order allowing such service.

Now Mrs. Gibson will have to come into court or settle.

This Is the Picture of Mrs. Preston Gibson—So Apparently Happy and Bouncingly Healthy—That Met the Amazed

Eyes of the Officers the Morning After Her Husband Had Written Them That the Poor Pursued Lady Had Been Quite Ill in the Hospital.

for Mrs. Gibson, but without authority to accept service for her of the writ.

The poor old writ! It was getting pretty badly mused up and decrepit by this time with all the constant handling! A nice, new, clean one took its place.

The detectives didn't have any luck. As Mr. Boskey says, "They were on their honeymoon and that made it harder, because naturally where they had gone would be kept secret and none of her friends seemed to know. Ordinarily it is easy to trace so well-known a person's whereabouts through acquaintances"—but, well, this was certainly different.

Then the subpoena began traveling. Mr. Norton had written that "Mrs. Gibson resides in Newport, R. I. Since I believe that is her legal residence, any mail addressed to her there will be forwarded wherever she may be."

Right up in the mails went the summons to Newport, addressed to Attorney Boskey's correspondents there. And back it came with a letter, saying that "Mrs. Preston Gibson has not been in Newport this Summer. I am informed she is in California and is not coming here. I have had several writs in the hands of the sheriff for service upon her, and as yet have not been able to make service because of her absence."

Off to California went the writ. And thereafter, like Mary's famous little lamb, wherever Mrs. Gibson was reported to be there the writ was sure to go—Palm Beach, Coronado, White Sulphur Springs, As Attorney Boskey somewhat wearily puts it:

"The Gibsons rarely traveled about a

good deal. No sooner would we learn that she really was in Newport and get in touch with an agent there, when we would learn from him that he had tried to serve the subpoena and that she had left town. Next day he might find that she was really back in town or hadn't actually left. California was worse. It takes four days at the quickest to get a letter through, and by the time the summons reached our agents there she would be stopping somewhere else!"

In October of last year, after twelve full months of this hide and seek, the Gibsons came definitely back to New York and settled down temporarily at No. 14 East Sixtieth street.

Right away Mr. Boskey telephoned. Mr. Gibson answered.

Mr. Boskey wanted to know what it was all about, anyway. Gasping a little at this, Mr. Boskey explained and launched into a recital of his year's efforts. Mr. Gibson, intimating that he had no time to listen to the story of anybody's life, wanted to know what Mr. Boskey wanted, anyway. Mr. Boskey, controlling himself with dread-filled effort, repeated that he wanted to serve the summons. Mr. Gibson doubtfully answered that he'd have to ask Mrs. Gibson about that.

After a while he came back and reported that Mrs. Gibson wouldn't consent to be served and advised Mr. Boskey to call up Mr. H. Freeman, of East Twenty-eighth street, who was Mrs. Gibson's agent.

Mr. Freeman said he was arranging Mrs. Gibson's finances as best he could, but that she didn't have a cent to pay the debt at the present time; wouldn't have until



Mr. Preston Gibson.

They tell a story of a swain who came a-courting his girl. When he rang the bell her brother appeared and threw him down the steps. He went right back and her father did the same thing to him. He tried again and they both threw him into the street. And as he was going up the steps for a fourth time he stopped. An idea had struck him.

"Well, I'll be switched," he said. "I don't believe they want me in that house."

Like that suitor, the attorneys for the jewellers decided that Mrs. Pratt didn't want to be served with that writ!

So the harassed officers in pursuit of her called in the aid of private detectives. They also, as Attorney Boskey was later to tell in the affidavit to the Supreme Court of New York, "continued to try to find her whereabouts by making inquiries at different newspapers, different hotels, agencies and magazines devoted to society news, but without success."

They also continued to telephone, as well as to write letters, to Mr. Elliot Norton, whom they had discovered to be attorney